Having the Last Laugh:

Women in Nineteenth Century Bengali Farces

by
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A *babu* at his paramour's feet

THE comedy of love; in which the female turns the tables on the male rarely finds a place in modern Indian literature, although it can claim a tradition shared by ancient Sanskrit poetry *(Amarusataka* by the seventh century poet Amaru, and his contemporary Bharatrihari's *Sringarasataka)* and the numerous folk tales and songs that are still current in different parts of lndia.

In sharp contrast to the combatant wife bringing to heel the wayward husband in our folk tales, or the astute courtesan leading by the nose her foolish lover in Sanskrit poetry, stands the heroine in modern pulp literature. She seems to be permanently fixed in the role of either a submissive wife destined to reform her lecherous husband, or of a repentant prostitute being rehabilitated by a generous male patron, or, lately (perhaps as a concession to the feminist wave), of a prodigal wife who after her escapades finally finds shelter in her husband's home, or of a vamp reformed by an indulgent paramour.

Upside Down World

Although it was a modern novelist from Bengal- Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay - who set these norms for fictanalisation of Indian women in pulp fiction and Hindi films, curiously enough, it was nineteenth century Bengal which produced a crop of lierature that depicted a type of Bengali woman completely antithetical to the image sought to be built up the *bhadralok* literati in contemporary poetry, fiction and social criticism. These were the farces and comic verses which lampooned religious hypocrites, senile polygamist, profligate husbands, whoremongers and rakes, who were perceived as dominating the social scene of Bengal in those days. Women were the victims of these characters. But while serious mainstream contemporary Bengali literature bemoaned the fate of these women, depicting them as harassed snivellers, the farces often showed them in a different light and in a variety of roles. Passing through their pages are the ingenious wives who catch their husbands in *flagrante delicto* and humiliate them in public or, even better, turn them into cuckolds; village hoydens making fools of lecherous priests; urban prostitutes outfitting the Anglicised *parvenu.* Women here have the last laugh. In a world turned upside down, the roles of the dominant male and the dominated female are reversed.

Written primarily by a host of male authors and poetasters, these cheap publications (known in Bengali as Battala books since they came out from the printing presses that were then concentrated in the Battala area of north Calcutta) were perhaps not merely a fanciful reconstruction of the world but also a response to conditions in contemporary Bengal where the collapse of traditional social norms under the impact of colonial economic and educational systems had led to a juxtaposition of divergent attitudes marked by diminution of respect for conventions and orderliness in the manners of both men and women. Unconventional behaviour on the part of women in particular became a contentious issue.

The Battala authors betrayed a peculiar ambivalent attitude towards such women. At one level, they feared their self assertion as a threat to the established male dominance. This fear often made them portray these women as incorrigible shrews or dangerous

All illustrations accompanying this article are reproductions of drawings by nineteenth century folk artists of Kalighat, Calcutta

seductresses or wayward women corrupted by education. At another level, they shared the common householder's fears about the new breed of male libertines -the *nouveau riche compradores* and their hangers-on, the parasitic priests and the Anglicised youth who ill treated their wives at home, and caroused outside with prostitutes, or abducted other men's young wives and daughters. Self assertive women were found by these authors to be the most suitable tools for cutting down to size these hypocrites and rakes. Thus, a sneaking admiration crept in even when they ostensibly tried to attack such women for serious breaches of rules of feminine conduct.

Contemporary Records

A brief look at contemporary records would help us reconstruct the historical background of Battala literature. Quite a large number of women in Bengali upper caste, middle class homes were victims of Kulin polygamy - a practice which allowed a privileged section of Brahman males called Kulins (the term Kulin in Bengali suggests a claim of high or noble descent) to contract an unrestricted number of marriages. According to contemporary reports, these Kulin Brahman husbands negotiated marriages all over Bengal into Kulin families. This was an inbreeding community and had to marry off its daughters only to Kulin Brahmans. Often, a man would visit his wives only once in a lifetime. A contemporary Bengali newspaper *(Jnyaneshwan,* April 23, 1836) gave a list of at least 24 well known Kulin Brahmans, the number of whose wives ranged from 10 to 60 each, spread all over Bengal. A letter by a Kulin Brahman's wife in another Bengali newspaper *(Samvad Koumudi,* February 26,1831) provides a typical instance of the plight of wives of Kulin Brahmans. Her mother was married off along with her two aunts (the mother's sisters) to a Kulin Brahman, who visited them only once, as a result of which the wives bore him a daughter each, including the letter writer. When she was 10 years old, the father revisited the home, and forcibly married off her and her sisters to a Kulin bridegroom who was as old as her elder uncle. "Since then", she wrote, "for the last 50 years I haven't set my eyes upon my husband.. and have been working as a servant in a relative's home..."

Unlike the Kulin Brahmans, the Srotriyas - another class of Brahmans - were required to pay bride price for the marriage of their sons. This gave rise to the practice of sale of daughters by greedy Brahmans on the pretext of marrying them off. Sometimes, the daughters outwitted the fathers. The Bengali newspaper *Samachar Darpan* of November 10, 1821 reports a funny incident from a village in Burdwan where a Brahman' father demanded Rs. 400 from a Srotriya bridegroom in exchange for his daughter. The daughter saw the bridegroom, liked him and met him on the sly. She advised him not to pay her father the money demanded by him, and persuaded him to marry her the same night in a secret ceremony, leaving behind the furious father stamping his feet in impotent rage.

In nineteenth century Bengal, along with Kulin daughters, and young widows (who escaped becoming *Satis,* victims of child marriage, and who, after the death of their old husbands, were left dependent on their parents) lived in a sort of limbo. Considered unwanted by society and liabilities by their families, they had to fend for themselves. While some fell victims to seducers and ended up in brothels (a mid nineteenth century report estimates that of the 12,000 odd prostitutes in Calcutta, more than 10,000 were Hindu widows and Kulin daughters), a few others showed courage and initiative by leaving their homes and choosing their own male partners. This was possible by becoming a Vaishnavite.

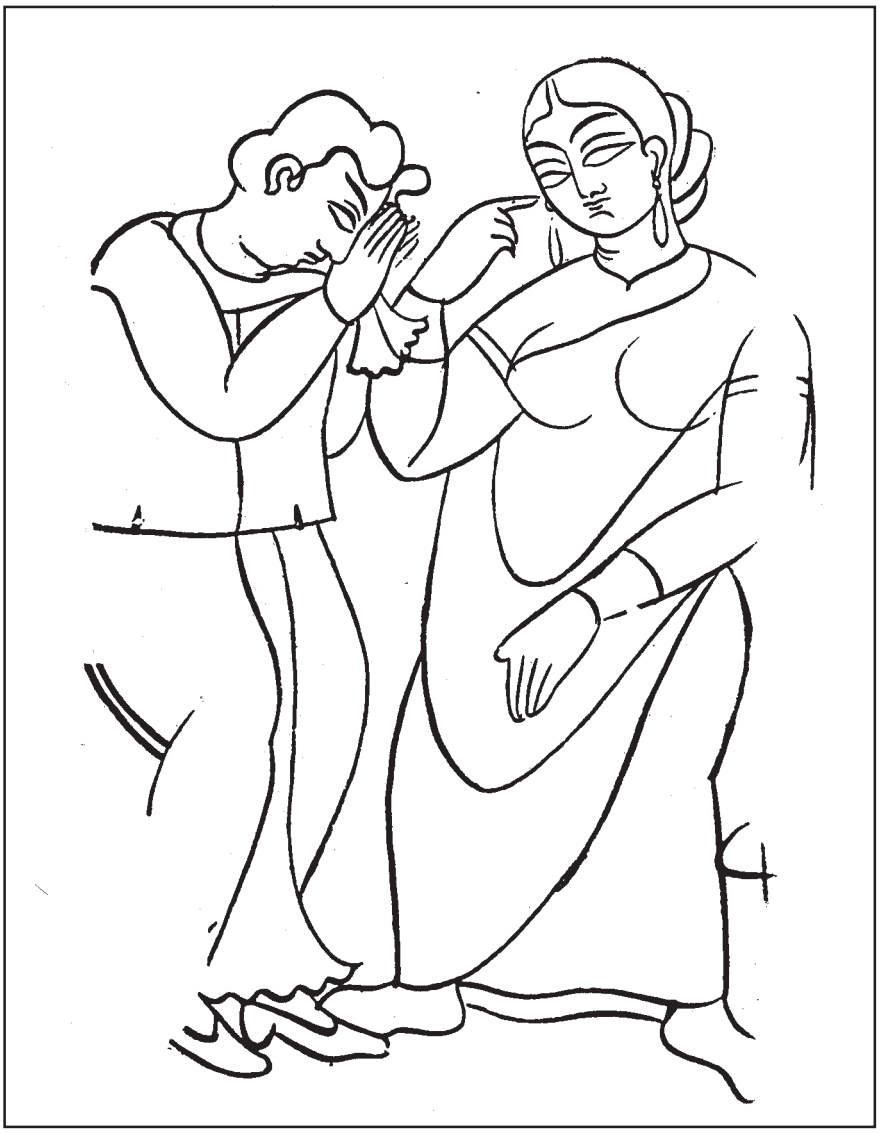
The Census of India, Bengal, 1872, tells us that the followers of Vaishnavism "open their arms to those who are rejected by all others - the outcasts, the crippled, the diseased and the unfortunate." Contemporary records abound with references to women in villages - widows, married and unmarried women - deserting the claustrophobic upper caste *zenana* to join some Vaishnavite *akhara* or monastery. Here, religious norms allowed them a freedom of movement (that helped them to earn their livelihood eilher by singing religious songs or teaching), and a certain liberty in relations with men - privileges which were out of reach for the rich and middle class *zenana* bound women of the time. Quite predictably, there was a lot of male prejudice against these independent Vaishnavite women, who were often branded prostitutes.

Social reformers saw the accumulation of fortunes in the hands of the get-rich-quick class *of parvenu* as providing them with an unrestricted power to cock a snook at old norms. Reminiscing about those times, the Brahmo reformer Shibnath Shastri (1847-1919) tells us how these people used to introduce themselves by claiming that they had built *pucca* houses for their concubines. Among their hangers-on were a variety of people ranging from unemployed cronies to unscrupulous priests, who accompanied the *babus* in drinking bouts and whoremongering. In 1873, the *mohunt* of the famous Tarakeshwar temple, near Calcutta, got involved in a scandal that created headlines in contemporary newspapers and provided the Battala authors with a regular staple. The *mohunt* seduced a young village girl, Elokeshi, whose husband worked as a clerk in Calcutta. The *mohunt* made her his concubine, and through his money and muscle power thwarted the husband's efforts

to rescue the girl. The husband, unable to take on the powerful *mohunt,* took it out on the poor wife. He killed her and went to jail to serve a sentence of life imprisonment, while the *mohunt* got away with a lighter sentence of three years!

Covert Rebellion

The breakdown of the old social order influenced women in different ways. Rebellion took the form of efforts to improve their situation within the family (through education and reforms like widow remarriage) as well as breaking away from traditional norms by competing with the men on the latter's terms (infidelity and drunken dissoluteness, which were resorted to by some women to wreak vengeance on their menfolk). A letter written by some women from Chinsurah in Bengal, in *Samachar Darpan* of March 21, 1835, asked why they should not be allowed to move around and mix freely with other men, choose their own husbands, and remarry after the death of their husbands. Some years later, some other women in Ranaghat dared to assert their independence in a more unconventional way. A report appearing in the Bengali journal *Sulabh Samachar* in 1872, written by a male correspondent, expressed shock at the news of "certain respectable Hindu women sitting and drinking in a circle" and "going out into the streets at the dead of night to create troubles."



Secret affairs were frequently commented upon as an avenue of escape from the strict austerity imposed on young widows and the humiliating isolation that was the lot of the longsuffering Kulin wives. Several issues of the Bengali journal *Tatvabodhini Patrika* of 1856, while commenting on the ill effects of Kulin polygamy, child marriage and permanent widowhood, listed the following:"... abortions, adultery, suicide, murder of women, infanticide...." While most of these women having affairs chose to remain in their homes and lead a sort of double life, a few dared to defy social opprobrium and eloped with their lovers.

The Bengali newspapers and journals, edited as they were by middle class men, rarely reported such incidents. But they are revealed in private letters of those times (collected by Panchanan Mandal in his fascinating study of reflections of social life in letters, entitled *Chithipatre Samajchitra,* in two volumes). The conservative Brahmo editors of *Tatvabodhini Patrika,* while condemning adultery among women in middle class Bengali homes, thought they saw the logic behind their behaviour: "When they, leading a life of imprisonment, watch the prostitutes enjoying freedom, and observe their husbands carousing with the prostitutes, is it not natural that they would be inflamed with a similar passion for immoral deeds which they mistake for pleasure? We have heard of many helpless women leaving their homes and joining the prostitutes." (1846, Vol. 36).

The heroines of Battala farces were modelled upon these women who were making their presence felt in nineteenth

Woman trampling on her lover, by Kali Charan Ghosh

century Bengal, a type which, though numerically small, had acquired an articulate and demonstrative character because of their social behaviour. They had sent shock waves along the fragile spine of a disorderly society dominated by a new male generation which made the most of the prevailing loss of confidence in traditional standards, and yet refused its women a share in the social and sexual innovations that it had practised.

Efforts at organised assertion of equal rights (like the letter from the Chinsurah women mentioned earlier) apparently did not lead anywhere. Such strident demands were later neutralised by the sterilised reforms of the Bengali *bhadralok* who offered their women the illusion of equality in their new role as educated wives serving as companions to their husbands in society, but also required them to adhere to the traditional norms of a housewife in the home. In the absence of an organised movement, assertion of independence among women in nineteenth century Bengal dispersed itself in individual protests seeking a variety of avenues.

The Farcical Mirror

Most of the husbands in the farces are either doddering old fogeys married to young girls, or lechers who ill treat their wives and revel with prostitutes. A typical farce is *Bridhhashya Taninee Bharjya* (Old Man's Young Wife) published in 1874 anonymously. It is about old Rajiv Ganguly and his third wife Hemangini. Just to spite her husband, she gets involved with two young men of the village, Priyanath and Shyamapada, while old Rajiv remains a mute spectator. In Upendranath Bhattacharya's *Ajogya Parinoy* (The Misfits), published in 1880, old Nandadulal marries a young girl, Tarulata, who finally escapes the clutches of her senile husband by running away with her former lover. Shambhunath Biswas's 1883 farce *Phochkey Chhmurir Gupto Katha* (The Secret Tale of a Flippant Girl) narrates the story of an old man's young wife who keeps on eluding his efforts to catch her with her paramour.

The best specimen of this genre is of course the famous poet Michael Madhusudan Dutt's play *Buro Shaliker Ghare Rino* (The Dotard Sports a Plume) which came out in 1860. Although Dutt cannot be put in the same category as the Battala authors (who were associated with a rather inelegant style of writing and cheap presses), the racy dialogue and the peppy behaviour of the women characters in his play make them the most lively representatives of the type under discussion. The hero (or villain?) of the play is the sanctimonious hypocrite *zamindar,* Bhaktaprasad who wants to seduce Fatema, the pretty young wife of his tenant Hanif Gaji. When the couple comes to know of his intentions, they hatch a plot to teach him a lesson. Fatema pretends to fall in with Bhaktaprasad's wishes and agrees to meet him one evening at a deserted spot. Bhaktaprasad turns up decked out in his finest clothes, and as he is about to court Fatema, Hanif Gaji appears and gives him a sound thrashing, forcing Bhaktaprasad to promise that he will never again chase

women.

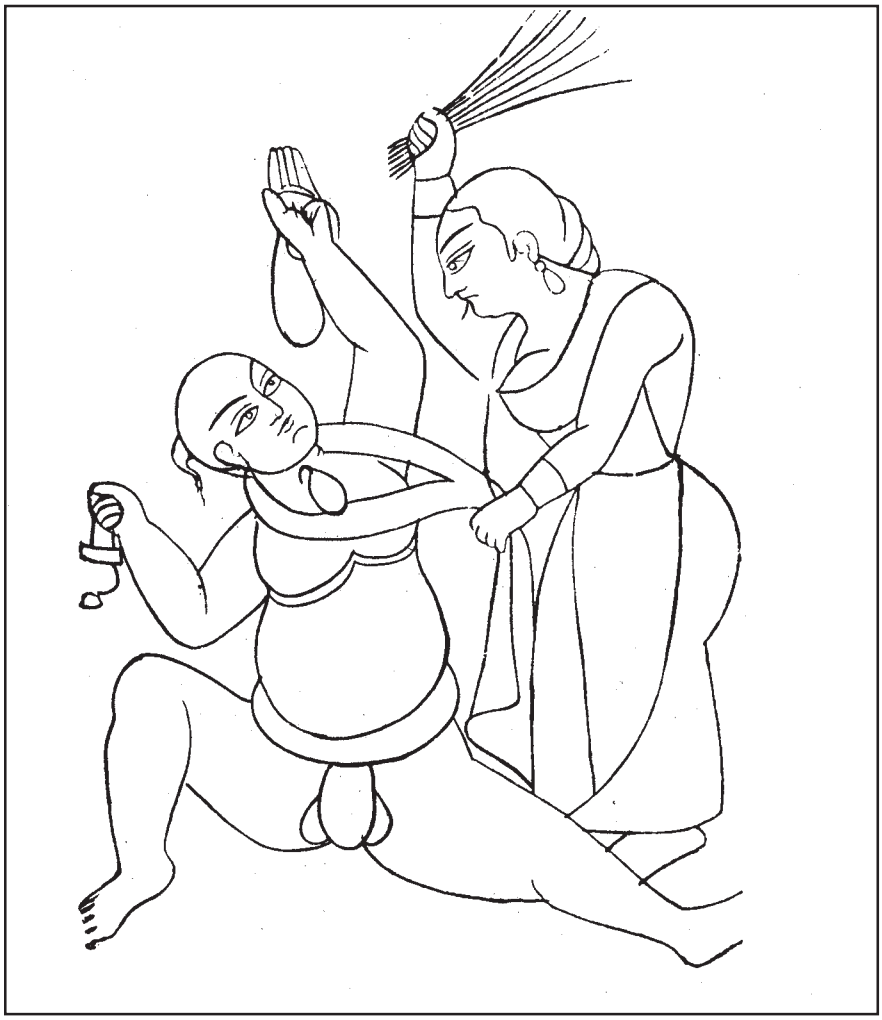
Dutt's contemporary, the playwright Dinabandhu Mitra published in 1866 the famous farce *Sadhabar Ekadashi* which gave a vivid account of the manners and habits of the sons of the Bengali *nouveau riche* - their escapades and drinking bouts, their abasement at the hands of their paramours, and their ill treatment of their wives who were forced to lead the lives of widows although married (which explains the title of the play). Unlike the passive wives of *Sadhabar Ekadashi,* the heroine of *Er Upay Ki?* (What's the Way Out?) written by Meer Musharaf Hossain in 1893, humbles the errant husband. Meer Musharaf, a well known novelist and playwright, cannot strictly be called a Battala author. The farce *Er Upay Ki?* was first published in Tangail, a mofussil town (now in Bangladesh). Muktakeshi and her friend Raimoni decide to get even with the former's husband Radhakanta,who spends most of his time with the prostitute Nayantara. Radhakanta comes home one night and finds Muktakeshi with a man in her bed. When Radhakanta abuses her for cuckolding him, Muktakeshi retorts that she too has the same right to extramarital relations as her husband has. Radhakanta has no answer to her arguments and repents, promising her his faithfulness from now on. It is only then that the man reveals his identity, and turns out to be Muktakeshi's friend Raimoni in male attire!

The Battala farces, however, did not have to resort to the stratagem of dressing up females as males to help wives retaliate against their dissolute husbands. In *Rahashya Mukur* (Mirror of Fun) published in 1886, Suchatura, the wife of a lecherous polygamous landowner, drugs him with morphia mixed in his betel leaf, collects all his money and the ornaments and escapes with her lover Madan. Another farce, *Tumi Kar?* (To Whom do You Belong?) published in 1884 - has a funnier story. An avaricious Srotriya Brahman makes money by selling his daughter to one bridegroom after another. When the first son-in-law, an absentee, working elsewhere, returns to the village to take back his wife, he is told that she is not traceable (the fact being that she has been married off to another man in a different village). Meanwhile, the cunning old Brahman's second wife, a young woman, falls in love with this son-in-law of his. She reveals to him her husband's stratagem, and persuades him to elope with her.

In the Battala farces, the prostitutes always have an edge over the male clients - the profligate husbands from the Bengali households, the *nouveau riche* libertines, the lecherous Hindu priests. In Bhuban Chandra Mukhopadhyay's *Ma Eyechen* (Here Comes Mother) published in 1873, the heroines are two prostitutes, Kamini (a Kulin daughter who eloped with a cousin and ended up in a brothel) and Mohini. Mohini is kept as a mistress by Kanai who resents her entertaining other clients. One evening, when Mohini is entertaining an old lover of hers, Kanai arrives. Mohini dresses up the lover as an old widow and palms him off on the gullible Kanai as her mother who has just arrived!

Pearymohan Sen's *Rmar, Bhmar, Mithye Katha, Teen Loye Kolkata* (Calcutta is Made Up of Whores, Buffoons and Lies) which came out in 1864,

Woman thrashing a priest



celebrates the exploits *of a sadhu* who comes to the city from a village and, after being seduced by a prostitute, remains tied down to the brothels and drinking joints. The success of the prostitutes in getting the upper hand of their male clients is described in detail in *Nababaubilash* (1825) and *Nababibibilash* (1831), written by a veteran journalist editor, Bhabanicharan Bandyopadhyay. In the form of prose narratives interspersed with verses, the two books are a delightful send-up of contemporary *babus* being literally made to crawl at the feet of prostitutes, spending all their fortunes on providing their mistresses with *pucca* houses and jewellery, and then being reduced to paupers to be cast away like peeled off banana skins.

Conservative Self Contradiction

One should not however rush away with the impression that the authors of Battala farces were all praise for their self assertive heroines.

The moral that is quite often appended to the stories is that no good comes of such assertion of independence by women. Theirs is a generally conservative approach that attacks in one broad sweep male debauchery and female deviation, prostitution and widow remarriage, concubinage and women's education.

The attack is however seldom bitter. A goodhumoured raillery runs through all these farces. It is the social incongruity - the sight of a woman (hitherto sheltered in middle class homes and perennially obedient) suddenly coming out in the open and behaving in an unconventional manner (drinking and defying the prevailing social norms) that becomes the source of the comic in these farces.

As mentioned earlier, when these women get even with the swaggering males, when the omnipotent male is turned into a colossus with clay feet, the authors cannot conceal their secret admiration. Thus, the ostensible satire against the domineering woman turns out to be as much a mockery of male superiority. In spite of the moral intentions of the authors, the heroines, with their nimble witted drollery and gusto, seduce the readers into becoming their ardent admirers.

Slow Poison: The Cigarette Blitz

The new Ms cigarette, aimed at young, educated, urban women, made its appearance with an advertising blitz in the big cities. The ads played on the fact that for women of this group, smoking is often a way to assert equality with men and to defy the stereotype set up by the Hindi film that a woman who smokes and drinks is by definition immoral.

The Ms cigarette appears in India at a time when the hazards of smoking are better documented than ever before. It has now been established that smoking causes lung cancer. In addition, there is a close association between smoking and laryngeal cancer, oral cancer, esophageal cancer, kidney cancer and several other kinds of cancer. Smoking is also associated with gastrointestinal diseases. Some of the components of smoking act adversely on respiratory and circulatory systems.

In many countries in the West, as a result of activist groups' campaigns against smoking, governments have taken steps to combat the habit and to restrict advertising. Finding their market threatened, tobacco industries have turned their attention to new groups - women and the third world. The equivalent of the Ms ad was the Virginia Slims ad in the US with the slogan "You've come a long way, baby" addressed to the supposedly liberated woman. In the US, the number of women smoking has steadily risen. Studies suggest that women smoke to assert their independence, to confront stress at home and at work, and to keep their weight down. In the US today, lung cancer has become a leading cancer killer of women, higher than breast cancer. While male lung cancer has declined, rates for women continue to rise. Some studies have suggested that smoking affects women worse than it does men. It has an adverse effect on the birthweight of the foetus, and increases the risk of prematurity and neonatal death.

In India, cigarette consumption has doubled in the last 20 years. While in many lower caste and labouring communities, women did consume tobacco in the form of *bidi* or *hookah* smoking or chewing, it was generally frowned upon in the educated middle classes. The Ms cigarette ads try to make smoking seem an acceptable, even "feminine" activity with their slogan: "Who says a woman wants to be like a man?" In Delhi, the municipality has tried to counter these hoardings by juxtaposing them with hoardings of a skeleton smoking, and highlighting the dangers of smoking. However, the issue is not confined to Ms cigarettes. All cigarette advertising is misleading, glamourising the act of smoking as linked to freedom, happiness and success. Passive smoking, that is, being exposed to smoke from someone else's cigarette, is also hazardous to health and is likely in India to affect many more women than direct smoking, as many wives and children would be unable to prevent the man of the house from smoking.

While cigarette advertising has been shown to coincide with a rise in the number of smokers, in countries like England and Canada where national campaigns against smoking and restrictions on cigarette ads exist, considerable decreases in the number of smokers have occurred. Cigarette manufacturers should be compelled by law to hand over to a statutory body set up for the purpose, an amount equal to or more than the amount spent by them on advertising cigarettes. This body would use the money so collected to publicise information on the hazards of smoking. ❐